LIFE

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Wireless network solutions hit home

DIGITAL SURVIVOR

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It's six in the morning on one of the last days of summer, and to prove a point, I'm writing this column out by my pool.

All I needed to get to work and gain access to my home network and the Internet was my laptop.

No wires, no fuss, no muss.

It's a way of responding to the people who took exception to last week's column, which suggested that you consider wiring your home with a local area network (LAN). They weren't quibbling with the idea of home-based LANs — after all, many of us want to be able link our various personal computers at home. But they took issue with suggesting a technology based on wires.

Wires have almost become retro, as companies such as 3Com and Apple provide homes and offices with a very uncomplicated way of linking different computers without wires.

There's no doubt that wireless technology for LANs is going to be a fast-growing market. Consulting company Frost & Sullivan, based in Mountain View, Calif., suggests that by 2002, the wireless market will be worth $884-million (U.S.), and will experience a torrid annual growth rate of more than 100 per cent.

But the technology is already here, and it works extremely well. In my case, it was simple to install a wireless LAN, using the new 3Com AirConnect product. I simply took the "base station" — think of it as a transmitter — and lugged it into my existing wired-home network to link to my other computers and the Internet.

I placed it up high on a shelf on my main floor so that it had good transmission capabilities. I then installed an AirConnect wireless card into my laptop, did a little bit of configuration, and walked out the back door to the pool.

Wireless LAN technology lets me tap into my home network from within a few hundred feet of my home, and from there, gain access to my high-speed Internet connection — all at speeds equal to what I'm getting on my traditional home-based LAN.

So although the previous column suggested you consider building a home-based local area network using traditional Ethernet wiring, you should keep a wireless LAN in mind as a worthy alternative.

Keep in mind that you will pay a bit of a premium compared with the wired solution, but I'd expect the cost to drop as new technology hits the market.

If you want to understand where this important technology is going, visit the home of what has come to be known as the "Wi-FI standard." It's found at the Wireless Ethernet site **(www.wirelessethernet.org)**

In a nutshell, technology companies have come to agree on methods by which different wireless LAN products can work together. In the not-too-distant future, you might be able to buy a base station from one vendor, and link into it using a network card from another vendor.

This fact alone will help to drive down prices, and make wireless technology that much more of a worthy contender.

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